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ABSTRACT

A qualitative study explored the potential for using a male and female systems model (identified as the White Male System and the Female System by Anne Wilson Schaef) to analyze the news coverage of a woman executive mired in controversy. The female chancellor of the University of Missouri-Columbia was engaged in a public controversy concerning a multi-million dollar reallocation plan. Source quotations, or author quotations, of 212 news articles, editorials, and letters to the editor were perused for references to the chancellor and the reallocation plan. Results indicated that the chancellor's statements were predominantly Female-System based and those of the critics (both male and female) were predominantly White-Male-System based. Findings suggest that public relations practitioners should be aware of the existence of the varying systems and how they can be manifested in public discourse so that reporters and editors can be educated about the seemingly hidden realities being presented by their coverage and selection of sources. (RS)

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WOMAN UNDER FIRE: AN EXECUTIVE'S NEWS COVERAGE AND THE WHITE MALE AND FEMALE SYSTEMS

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"Just Look What Happens": An Introduction

Newspaper column item: "I was having lunch in the Bell Memorial Union the day I read the story on [Athletic Director Janet] Kittell and the 'car issue' in the 'Chico News & Review.' I could hear a couple of men talking at a table next to me about the article. One of them said something to the effect that the athletic department should be run by a man because women have a tendency to screw things up" (Fierro-Green, 1990).

The realm of the news provides a (one) social reality, and it is there, in the news, that scholars urgently need to seek out the multiple realities if women executives can be adequately represented by public relations counsel.

How can there be adequate representation by counsel when these executives themselves still must battle media effects that play to predetermined attitudes? Must we accept, as practitioners and as researchers, a social world in which newspaper readers can conclude, "Just look what happens when we put women in charge!"

This paper will not answer these questions. But it will present the current limitations on research of women in the news and, through case study, application of a model for analyzing news coverage from a female systems perspective.

Traditional Studies on Representation of Women In The News

In searching the literature for this study, the author concluded, as have others, that the prevalent research on women who appear in media accounts falls in the field of advertising and on the television medium.

No Hard News Today. In reviewing results of 17 studies between 1975 and 1988, Greenwald (c. 1989) found that the studies uncovered unrepresentation of women in hard news and in professional roles, explained by the journalistic practice of power structure coverage, which is dominated by men.

According to Greenwald, all but two studies centered on large city, large circulation newspapers. Yet the majority of the newspapers in the country are mid-sized community papers, a situation that might well cause genuine public relations problems for the woman executive located in such a community.

Words Not Deeds. Myer, in studying coverage of Mary Cunningham and William Agee (1983), using John C. Merrill's adverbial and adjectival bias categories, found "she was most often characterized with adjectives -- descriptors of a person, while he was frequently characterized by adverbs -- descriptors of how he acted -- or by verbs -- descriptors of his actions. In other words, Mary Cunningham was praised or criticized for what she was, while William Agee was criticized, for the most part, for what he did."

Despite hypothesizing otherwise, Jolliffe (1989) found that headlines on stories about persons, categorized either taking action or "being acted upon," reflected action content that was nearly equal for women. Males were more often being acted upon than acting.

Women As Victims, Not Winners. A study conducted by a Christian Science Monitor staff writer, reported in Media Report to Women (1988), reinforces the potential in investigating controversy coverage and gender. Those women who made front-page stories were often treated "not as winners or equal competitors but as victims or problems, such as when 'Patricia Schroeder received more front-page coverage for shedding a few

public tears than she did for running a brief but respectable 'testing the waters' campaign" (p. 7).

Methodological Needs in Studying News

Because much of news media study on gender concentrates on advertising, it is important to not repeat the same methodological biases found in such studies when concentrating on news coverage.

One such methodological problem singled out in a feminist critical analysis (Duffy, 1991) pertained to male and female perceptions of leadership. In this study, she noted, the author "is unquestioningly linking managerial abilities to stereotyped male attributes. He ignores traits such as adaptability, flexibility, ability to handle conflict, nurturance, patience, intelligence, accuracy, meticulousness, creativity, and intuitive abilities which many would consider important characteristics for managerial success" (p. 19).

Duffy's hypothesis that "male values infuse the critical process and distort it from conception to interpretation" is reiterated by Creedon (1991) who challenges not the integrity of individual researchers but the assumptions of science in looking at roles research in public relations.

One way in which the issue of gender can be approached is to move now to studying news about women from a woman's perspective, as some researchers have suggested for communication studies (Foss and Foss, 1983) and for social movement theory (Edson, 1985).

This paper, then, will explore the potential for using a male and female systems model to analyze news coverage of women, basing the model on the work of Anne Wilson Schaef (1985).

The White Male System and the Female System

In the early 1980s, Anne Wilson Schaef published a book that outlined her conception of female, ethnic and white male systems, honed after years of private practice as a psychotherapist. She hypothesized that although both systems exist, what had been missing was "understanding and awareness of...the White Male System" (1985, p. 2), a system in which both females and ethnic groups live but which is not reality. The Schaef concept is that these systems exist and, without assigning value judgment, one must understand how the systems work to influence individuals and society.

The White Male System, of course, dominates American society; this system holds the power and influence. But the White Male System is based, says Schaef, on "four great myths that feed it, sustain it, and (theoretically, at least) justify it" (p. 7). One myth is that the White Male System is the only thing that exists and its view of the world is "right." Thus, Female System beliefs and perceptions are sick, bad, crazy, stupid, ugly, incompetent, and illustrate that women do not understand reality. Two other myths place the White Male System as innately superior and omniscient. A final myth is that it is possible to be totally logical, rational and objective. Thus, women are illogical, irrational and not objective.

Indicators appropriate to the sample selected for this study are derived from Schaefs discussion of specific differences between the White Male System and the Female System.

The Sample

In higher education, women in top administrative posts no longer represent the truly unusual in news. And one way to root out subtlety in news coverage is to look in depth at one such woman executive when she is mired in controversy.

The situation of controversy heightens both source and reporter effects; the situation is a fast-moving one. Sources generally exhibit genuine passion on the issue; the reporter faces fast deadlines and quick decisions on which sources to select for inclusion in the story.

The purposeful sample in this study covers a three-month period at the University of Missouri-Columbia, with a multi-million dollar reallocation planning process the controversial issue. Although the concepts of the proposed reallocation had been widely discussed and approved by groups appropriate to the democratic atmosphere of a campus community, the final consultative stage began the public controversy. Each divisional area (provost, student services, administrative services, alumni and development and university relations) submitted reduction recommendations to respective divisional review committees made up of faculty, staff and students. Each committee was asked to review the divisional officer's plan and send its comments on to the chancellor of the campus who would then make a final set of recommendations to submit to the university's systemwide president.

Within three days of the divisional officers' specific recommendations to their committees, controversy began and the chancellor -- a female -- bore the brunt of the "target" reduction areas. (The controversy ended three months later by action of the university's governing board.)

In order to heighten further the opportunity to peruse the public discourse of this controversy, the sample is made up local coverage. Two daily newspapers competed for coverage of the biggest story in town. Further, the rhetoric used by news sources could be expected to be emotional. A study of 15 years of coverage found that when persons rather

than rules are dissent targets in the press, sources will deal with persons on a personal level of discontent (Yoder and Brenner, 1988).

Source quotations, or author quotations, of 212 news articles (including features), editorials and letters to the editor (including opinion articles) were perused for reference to the chancellor and the reallocation plan. Commentary solely to the plan was not coded; to be coded there needed to be discourse related to the chancellor herself and the plan.

From these statements, the following are excerpted to illustrate the potential for operationalizing the White Male System and Female System model for methodology in news bias research.

Results

The examples reported here are in order of the quantity found in the news coverage.

General System Differences

The world, in the White Male System, can be explained and there is a need to analyze and understand it; in the Female System, the world is constantly growing and changing.

Specific differences, to the White Male System are seen as threats while those differences are seen as opportunities for growth. The dualistic thinking that Schaef says typifies the White Male System may readily be identified as an "either-or syndrome." To the Female System, either and or is reality, a view of communication as bridging.

Consider the statement and response: "The chancellor observed in her talk that women have won the freedom to make career choices, 'I hope more women will enter non-traditional fields.'" An audience member response: "She assumes everyone wants to make it in a man's world."

. Consider the critic: "What she's doing, quite obviously, is setting one unit against each other. This is cheap. This is the most divisive thing I've ever seen."

Consider: "Is this the same chancellor who professed so much interest in affirmative action?"

Consider the reporter's summary: They "called on Chancellor Uehling to abandon the $10 million in planned budget reallocations or resign."

Consider: "...Dr. Uehling's action [to delay any recommendation to the president] is correct only if she will withdraw the plan for reallocation...if she is only delaying it, that only is going to continue the problem. That does nothing to solve the situation. The veiled threat is still there."

In the we-can't-possibly-think-together category: "Chancellor Uehling thinks this is an institution of poverty. I think this is an institution of richness and it's time to use that richness."

Consider the either "and" or approach: (Reported after a delay had been approved.) "The assumptions for the future have not changed," Uehling said. "I still believe that our needs are so great that the only way to meet them is through vertical reduction." The chancellor warned, however, "I don't want you to blame all the program reductions we're going to have on the lack of program eliminations."

Power

In the Schaef schema, power is a scarce resource, a "zero-sum" game in the White Male System. In the Female System, power can be shared because it is limitless. Leadership is a symbol of power and to the White Male System it means literally "to lead" while to the Female System, is means "to facilitate." Rules are devised to assist the leadership task; for the White Male System, rules exist to control others, to limit their freedom. Rules in the Female System exist to increase individual freedom in the processes of leadership and do not take precedence over the individual.

At a press conference following the delay of the recommendations: "Dr. Uehling said the major lesson she learned from the controversy is that there must be clarity and mutual understanding at the outset."

Two board of curators members -- the first a male, the second female: "I think this while thing started because of poor leadershy by Uehling. We don't have turmoil at the other campuses. We have good leadership there...I think her task force will do just what she want them to do. *If I had to appoint a task force, I'd make sure they would do what I wanted them to do.*" [Emphasis added.]

"I would first like to talk with Chancellor Uehling about the letter. I have some questions about the proposed task force. What is the time element involved? Who will make the appointments?"

The Four Myths of the White Male System

The four myths of the system, as stated earlier, conclude that the White Male System is the only thing that exists and its world view is "right" and realistic, that the system is innately superior and omniscient, and that one can be totally logical, rational and objective.

A supportive member of the Senate Education Committee, at a public hearing: "I think you're a year or two ahead of other state institutions. You have a very realistic approach."

A critic, in the aftermath: "Well, she finally woke up. Thank God."

Responsibility

Responsibility involves accountability and blame in the White Male System, says Schaef; in the Female System it means the ability to respond. Responsibility for the Female System is doing something when it needs to be done; blaming is not in the picture. Responsibility also involves decision making; making decisions in the White Male System follows Roberts Rules of Order but in the Female System, decision making is a consensual process.

Consider this direct response to the chancellor: "I think you, especially, should offer something to us."

And, a rally shout outside the chancellor's office: "Don't let Uehling ruin our schooling."

From the chancellor when the board halts the process: "I think we've gained an opportunity to have a clarification that we haven't had before. I think the future will have to play itself out." [We have a responsibility to respond and, after all, the world is a changing place.]

The Thought Process

Thought is a linear process in the White Male System; it is an efficient way to think. But to the Female System, thought has many dimensions and variants. In the Female System, more data can be added to thought: feelings, intuitions, process awareness to obtain group consensus.

Chancellor in a student rap session: "I certainly weigh many people's feelings in making my decisions."

And, responding to reporter's question: She "said that while she is sympathetic to university employees who would be hurt by proposed budget reallocations, the quality of the school is at stake. "I care about the people who are involved. They are valued, but it is difficult for them to believe it at a time like this."

Two critics commenting on a chancellor-initiated letter asking opinions on budgetary questions: "The answers aren't the type to be divided into 'yes' and 'no,' so there's no way to quantify the data they contain." And, "Her timing is absolutely terrible. The way she's soliciting information from the faculty is unfortunate."

The chancellor, commenting on the letter: "I wanted to see if feelings have changed since specific reductions were announced because there's no point in going ahead unless there's support from one place or another."

Negotiation

Particularly appropriate to the present study of controversy, negotiation definitions in the two systems provide differing world views. In the White Male System, negotiation is a way to manipulate others; as Schaef puts it, the "fun" is in winning. In the Female System, negotiation is seen as a process toward mutual agreement and the "fun" is in stimulated creativity and imagination.

Early in the process: "'I hope some rather creative things come out of the review committee,'" she [the chancellor] told a group of Missouri senators on Monday."

Chancellor: "It's time to regroup, rethink, and come back with better suggestions."

A reporter writes: "...academics in divisions once targeted for reduction or elimination...are still reveling in their perceived victory over campus administrators."

And in the same interview, the Chancellor: "I think people can have reasonable disagreements."

Concluding Notes

In this qualitative analysis, the chancellor's statements are predominantly Female-System based and those of the critics (both male and female) are predominately White-Male-System based. The use of both systems by female respondents is not surprising. Women, to succeed in this world do learn the White Male System and often become facile at using both. White males, on the other hand, appear to learn no other than their own.

What might the public relations counselor derive from the results? The most important is that the practitioner, when monitoring the public information function, be aware her- or himself of the existence of the varying systems and how they can be manifested in public discourse. The practitioner, thus aware, can encourage and educate reporters, editors on the seemingly hidden realities being presented by their coverage and selection of sources.

At this stage, public relations scholarship plays an even greater role and has an urgency attached to it. Feminist perspectives toward scholarship in public relations must begin now to study the multiple realities facing women executives. This scholarly study must provide not only its traditional and essential contribution to our literature but focus as quickly as possible on practical advice for the public relations counselor with a woman client. Despite the glass ceiling phenomenon, the numbers are increasing and responsibility for adequate counsel rests upon scholars' ability to respond.

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